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ABSTRACT

The vision quest is a technique used by primitive cultures to gain psychological or religious insight. During a vision quest, a person would wander alone into the wilderness, searching for a sign or vision that would reveal some truth. The basic psychological dynamics underlying the quest include free association and de-structuring; the intermingling of self and environment that culminates in the sign; and a natural, internal impetus toward psychological growth. Twenty undergraduate students undertook a modified version of this ancient practice by wandering away from their usual environment for several hours, alone, searching for an insight or sign concerning a question they had posed to themselves. Students kept a log of their experiences. Examination of the content and themes of the students' vision quests revealed that existential issues concerning death, meaninglessness, isolation, and responsibility often emerged. A follow-up questionnaire was administered 4 months after the course to determine whether the vision quest brought any beneficial, long-term effects. (Author/NB)

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Vision Quest: The Self in Search of Self

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Abstract

The vision quest was practiced among primitive cultures as a method of gaining insight into oneself. This activity was studied by asking 20 undergraduate students to undertake a modified version of this ancient practice -- to wander away from their usual environment for several hours, alone, searching for an insight or "sign" concerning a question they had posed to themselves. The basic psychological dynamics that underlie the quest include free association and de-structuring, the intermingling of self and environment that culminates in the "sign," and a natural, internal impetus towards psychological growth. Existential issues concerning death, meaninglessness, isolation, and responsiblity often emerged. The results of a follow-up questionnaire are discussed.

Vision Quest: The Self in Search of Self

In primitive cultures, especially among the American Indians (Brown, 1974; Neihardt, 1959), a method for gaining psychological or religious insight was the vision quest, or vision search. A person would undertake such a quest to find a solution to a crisis that confronted the clan, as a rite of passage into an adult identity, or out of a desire for religious understanding and self-discovery. The person would wander into the wilderness, alone, searching for a "sign" or "vision" that would reveal some truth. Because the person deprived himself of food, water, and shelter, often for several days, an altered state of consciousness was induced. This mixture of altered consciousness and an intense desire to discover triggered an experience, or a series of experiences, that led to insight. Traces of the vision quest remain in our contemporary culture -- including the common walk or drive by oneself to self-reflect, as well as the more rare odyssey across distant lands in search of self knowledge.

What happens during a vision quest? How does it lead to insight? Perhaps it was no coincidence that these questions entered my mind at about the same time I was searching for a new experiential exercise to use in teaching an undergraduate course on psychotherapy. I asked my twenty students to go on a vision quest, and by doing so hoped that the activity would help them

learn about their intrapsychic life -- as well as teach all of us something about the vision quest.

Beforehand I provided them with instructions that highlighted five important features of this ancient practice, which are: (1) to do it alone; (2) to wander away from your usual environment, without any predetermined destination in mind, allowing intuition or instinct to carry you along; (3) to allow a wandering of thoughts and emotions, a free association, to accompany the physical wandering; (4) to self-reflect and self-question -- posing to oneself, as a reference point for the wandering, either a specific question about some issue in one's life, or a more general existential question such as "Who am I?"; and, lastly, (5) to sustain an attitude of searching, looking, expecting a solution or insight into the question proposed, perhaps in the form of an external sign from the environment, or an internal realization, be it gradual or sudden.

The quest lasted four hours, just a fraction of the time primitive man devoted to the endeavor, but a more realistic goal for the students. They kept a log of their experiences, at half hour intervals jotting down their thoughts and feelings about what was happening, and at the end of the exercise wrote a summary.

I bit my lip as I awaited the day they would hand in their logs, for part of me feared the exercise would be a flop. But when all of the students -- including those who were initially

skeptical and unmotivated -- reported that the exercise did lead them to insights, to making decisions in their lives, to changes in their emotional states -- I knew we had stumbled onto something that worked. All we then needed to do was to understand how it worked. Our insights led to this paper.

Psychological Dynamics of the Vision Quest

First, let me discuss some of the psychological dynamics that underlie the vision quest. There seem to be three major features: (1) a process of free-association and de-structuring, (2) an intermingling of the self with the environment, particularly in the appearance of the "sign," and (3) a natural, internal push towards self-growth.

The vision quest is a process of free-association and de-structuring, a loosening of the psychological obstacles that ward off and restrict parts of the self. Similar to meditation and other altered forms of consciousness, it causes routine ego functions to disengage, to become "de-automatized" (Deikman, 1982). This frees the mind to perceive new aspects of itself and the environment. Wandering, unmoored from its usual physical and psychological surroundings -- the self has the opportunity to retrieve the jostled pieces of itself that bob to the surface. During their vision quests, many of the students reported a feeling of derealization, as if they were in dream or trance. Their associations drifted from observations about what was happening around them, to long forgotten memories, dreams, and

fantasies, to periods of heightened emotion. At times they felt elated, depressed, anxious, sad. Some cried. The attitude of self-questionning provided the fuel for the hidden pieces of themselves to surface; and the attitude of self-reflecting stimulated the observing ego or "observing self" to encounter and assimilate the pieces. Writing a log of their experiences helped the students in this observing and integrating process.

Though the vision quest is a wandering, it a wandering that has meaning and intentionality. It is a living projective test where people, consciously or unconsciously, drift to surroundings that reflect their intrapsychic life. A student who once jokingly referred to himself as a "latent schizophrenic" spent his vision quest on the dividing median of a busy highway. Another sat below a weeping willow tree while recalling her childhood experiences with a distant, neglectful mother. Jung (1952) might say that it is a true "synchronicity" of internal and external events; Eliade (1959), the famous historian of primitive religions, would describe it as a structuring of space based on the ontological thirst for meaning. The students often felt drawn to particular places -- to lakes and oceans as symbols of purification, rebirth, unity and peace; to bridges, which connoted transition and change; to cemeteries, where they mourned their losses and anticipated the inevitable. Some sought places they had not seen for years and tried to reconcile themselves with the past; others ventured into unfamiliar territory hoping

to find an unknown part of their identity. At times, a place would stir up anxiety, forcing the person to move on.

The dynamic interplay between the self and the environment had an impact on the person at various levels of conscious awareness. To the reader, the log entries resembled the cards of a projective test, richly packed with information, open to multiple levels of interpretation. At times it was clear that an event or the surroundings during the quest helped the person's associations to break through to new, productive avenues -- though the person could not always verbalize this effect.

The most powerful and therapeutic vision quests were those in which a "sign" appeared. It usually occurred suddenly, unexpectedly, catching the person off guard. The subjective experience was that it happened "out there" but simultaneously gripped one's intrapsychic world, triggering an idea, memory, or emotion. One student sees an old man who resembled her father, and realizes that "he must have loved me underneath all that drinking." Another student finds himself admiring the turrets on top of houses, and suddenly recognizes the turret as a symbol of how he had adapted to his schizophrenic mother and uncaring siblings. Ironically, at that moment, he hears music coming from the nearby campus, and the lyrics are clear, "If I build this fortress around your heart." Another student spends her vision quest in a cemetery, searching for the source of her confusion about her close fr end's recent death from brain cancer.

Suddenly, she sees a bouquet of flowers, which triggers her memories of the funeral, and intense feelings of loneliness and anger about her friend leaving her, as well as the sense that her friend is, in some way, still present. The sign helped move her through the grieving process.

According to the American Indians, the sign will appear and lead to insight when the person psychologically merges with the external environment. Aspects of the self are projected, fused into external cues. The sign, in other words, is the use of an external event to help elevate previously unconscious features of the self to conscious realization. It is something the person sees, hears, feels, or does that serves as a convenient, symbolic handle for stimulating intrapsychic change.

Although I played an important role in how the vision quest affected the students, it is important to note that during the quest itself there was no professional, no therapist present to assist them in the process. We must assume that there exists a natural, internal impetus towards psychological growth -- as stated in theories of self-actualization -- and that the vision quest taps this internal resource. The pressures of modern society may block this natural tendency. Allowing oneself time to self-reflect, the students noted, is not the norm in our materialistic, achievement-oriented culture. The students frequently mentioned how valuable it was to leave behind the worries and busyness of the everyday world; it was the re-

discovery of a neglected potential and a "purification of the mind". But, sadly, they also asked themselves, "Why did I have to be asked to do this; why haven't I let myself do this sort of thing more often?"

Existential Themes

If we examine the content and themes of the student's vision quests, we find that their internal push towards psychological growth often carries them to basic existential issues -- the issues of death, meaninglessness, responsibility, and isolation (Yalom, 1980).

1. Death: Many of the students thought about death and dying, including the loss of loved ones and their own death. These thoughts were accompanied by reassessments of past relationships, and of the meaning and purpose of their own lives. For some, issues about death were the main focus of the quest.

2. Meaninglessness: The concern about the meaning of one's life was a universal theme, even when death was not mentioned explicitly. As college students, approaching graduation, anticipating their future, they were especially concerned about life's purpose. The world sometimes seemed unfair, unpredictable, filled with suffering. Things didn't seem to make sense. Everyone, at one time or another during the quest, reflected on their past, looking for the causes, themes, patterns of their lives. Nostalgically, they longed for the simplicity and innocence of their childhood.

3. Responsibility: Grappling with life's meaning came hand-in-hand with the realization of one's responsibility for creating that meaning. Because they were college students, issues about dependence/independence and making choices for the future were magnified. But the method of the vision quest itself -- being alone and wandering -- stirs ideas about freedom and choice. Perhaps it even stimulates a sense of self-responsiblity, and, as one student noted, "the courage to walk alone and be myself."

4. Isolation: Being by oneself on the quest, away from home, observing strangers from a distance, also activated the feeling of separation, of loneliness. The students struggled with their needs and fears about relating intimately to others. They more fully appreciated their relationships with family, friends and lovers as a source of meaning in life.

The Follow-Up

We must ask whether the vision quest brings any beneficial, long-term effects. Four months after the course ended, I administered a follow-up questionnaire. When asked how often they thought of the quest, some students said "rarely," others replied "often." They reported that events during the day sometimes triggered memories of the quest, that they would tend to think of it when they were alone, or in times of doubt, confusion, and conflict, as if the quest served as a stable point of reference. Everyone could identify a central theme or issue that emerged in their quest. Many felt that they had gained some insight or a

sense of perspective on their lives. Two students had undertaken additional vision quests on their own; several students reported spending more time in self-reflection -- as in going for long walks or drives by themselves. They felt more introspective, more appreciative of being able to "step back and observe oneself." While some students had told other people about their quest, others considered it too personal to share.

Although I expect many of the students will long remember that day they went searching for a vision, I imagine the details and beneficial effects of the quest will gradually fade. Any insight, by any method, loses potency without further attempts to renew and deepen it. But even if only a faint memory of the quest lingers, then maybe that will suffice as a reminder that the opportunity for self-discovery awaits them.

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